



Ch'an Newsletter

No. 68 October, 1988

A SECOND MOON

(Lecture given by Master Sheng-yen on the Surangama Sutra, May 11, 1986)

Most people believe that theirs is the correct point of view. If over time they see that what they believe to be true is false, they will alter their opinion, and come to believe their new, reevaluated point of view to be correct. There is, of course, progress in this process, where old views are continually discarded; but when do we have the correct viewpoint?

The *Surangama Sutra* uses a particular analogy to illustrate this tendency to assume that what we believe in any given moment is absolutely true. When we look in the sky, we believe that we see the moon, the true moon, as it really is. But what ordinary sentient beings really see is a second moon, a false moon, a shadow of what is real.

Consider how inconsistent and inconstant are our everyday views of the things and people in our lives. Imagine how Elizabeth Taylor views the many husbands she has had over the years. Does she believe that the most recent is best? But after Richard Burton died, she is reported to have said that she loved him the best. What is she really looking for?

I have a student who is now in his 40's and over the years he has gone out with many, many women. He has always sought the ideal woman, and each time he introduces a woman to me, he declares that she is the best yet, far surpassing all the others. I ask him how he can be so sure, but it is like asking a man in the midst of a dream to see that he is dreaming.

Ordinary sentient beings lead their lives like a kind of crooked-leg worm that moves forward by grasping what is in front of it, then untangling its leg before it can move again. It is always grasping at one thing, and letting go of another.

We are like that worm, always grasping the secondary, never the primary. A second moon, not the first.

Distinguishing the second from the first moon requires understanding the nature of perception. To deal with this question we must be aware of that which understands and that which is understood. Are these two different phenomena, or are they one? Or is there yet another way to understand them?

We usually refer to that which knows as the self, "I," or "you." But in Buddhism this knowing entity, the self, is taken to be composed of two parts: one material, the other spiritual. We might consider the material part, which is variously referred to as the "root" or "organ" of consciousness, to be the nervous system. Can the nervous system exist and function independently of the spiritual part? No, from the Buddhist point of view, both the material and spiritual coexist. It is this combination that forms the entity that we call the self, the "I" or the "you" — that which knows.

The material and the spiritual aspects of the self cannot be considered to be combined into one entity or separated into two. Just consciousness, without a material adjunct, cannot function. The body, the nervous system, cannot function as the self, without its spiritual counterpart. Only when the material and the spiritual function together, do we then have a self. Neither can function without the other.

Next we must ask: if that which sees is the self, then what is that which is seen? That which is seen is everything that lies outside the self, including the spiritual and the material.

That which is seen by the self cannot be separate from the material, from matter. I can only sense or perceive a spiritual existence through interaction with matter. That which is seen is never apart from matter. In Buddhist terminology, what is seen is called the object or environment. Are the self and the environment two separate entities, or are they one?

Common sense tells us that "you" are not "I." He or she is not "I." All things we see — trees, grass, the floor, the furniture — are separate from ourselves.

This conventional understanding is what might lead me to pick your pocket, or you to pick someone else's pocket. The same reasoning might lead you to pursue another woman when you are already in a relationship. There is a continual pursuit of things outside ourselves. We feel incomplete, and we seek to add something that we think we do not have.

When I first left home, my master took me aside and said, "Sheng-yen, look at the world. Do you see how everyone tries to make a buck off the other guy? If everyone takes everyone else's money, whose money is it, anyway?" The only thing that I could think to say was that it seems like an inevitable process — everybody succeeds in

making some money at others' expense from time to time. But my master said, "You're wrong. Nobody gets anything from anybody else. Everyone simply makes money from himself. You may be a businessman or you may be a thief. Nevertheless, you are the source of the money you make." I had a difficult time understanding this. Do any of you understand?

Our environment is composed of six sense objects — what we see, hear, smell, taste, touch, and think. Then we might assume that the "I" consists of the six sense organs — the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind — and the six associated consciousnesses. Thus, we might conclude that the environment is something outside ourselves; it is "not I."

Today Judy Chen from the Lai Lai Restaurant provided the food for our lunch. We got something from her. If, at another time, another woman prepares our lunch, then we would get something from her. It seems that we always get something from someone else.

This is not so, because in reality, the six sense organs, the six sense objects, and the six sense consciousnesses are always together. The "I" and the environment are really not separate.

Someone who is blind has no idea of what is meant by "yellow," "red," or "green." A beautiful flower, a beautiful painting, or a beautiful woman mean nothing. These things have no existence for the blind. For the deaf, beautiful sounds and beautiful music have no existence. By the same token each of us sees and hears something different from the other people around us. We each live in a unique world, our own universe. The environment in which we live, in which we are born, and in which we die is something that is unique to each of us. Even identical twins live in very different worlds. Even though a couple sleeps in the same bed night after night, it is a different bed for each partner.

This lecture is a different lecture for everyone of you. When you are born, your world appears. When you die, your world dies with you. Other people live and die in their own worlds.

We may believe that Judy prepared a delicious meal for us today, but truly speaking, we simply ate our own food. We got nothing from her. Of course, when she hears this she may stop bringing food to the Center. But in the same manner, she really ate all of the food that she brought here. We took nothing from her.

This is to say that what Judy is doing is cultivating her own environment. Whatever she does will affect her environment, her world. What she sows, she will

reap. It doesn't make any difference whether or not we pay her back for what she has given us. She will reap the consequence of her actions in her own world.

If you work hard for something and you dedicate your efforts to another person, to the temple, or perhaps to the Buddha, this is what the Taiwanese, adopting a term from the Japanese, call "making a deposit." You have something of worth, and you deposit it somewhere. For a Christian, it is making a deposit in the kingdom of heaven, where God reckons all accounts. Whether God does take care of these accounts is another question. But the fact is that when you act, you make a deposit and the merits or faults are stored. It is these deposits, the consequences of your acts, that will affect you and you alone.

Thus, when robbers and thieves steal from someone, they really steal from themselves. They steal from their own world. It is said that an octopus will feed on its own limbs when it is starving. It is the same with robbers and thieves. It seems that they get something from someone else. But when something is obtained falsely — not through your own efforts — you pay it back, eventually. It is not just the principle that you will pay; interest will be added, too.

Let me go back to my earlier question. Are the "I," that which sees, and the object, that which is seen, one thing or two separate things? If they were one, then there would be no way to distinguish between what sees and what is seen. If they were two separate things, they would exist in and of themselves, and there would be no relation between them. The answer is, then, that what sees and what is seen cannot be said to be one thing and cannot be said to be two.

If you really understood and accepted this principle, you would see how pointless quarrels are between couples, fights between brothers, or the ending of friendships. A husband would consider a quarrel between his wife and himself as his own right foot stepping on his left. It would be like biting his own tongue.

With this attitude, you will find any place or any time full of promise. Thinking of someone you meet for the first time as a stranger will be as absurd as thinking that your left eye has just met your right. You know that they have always been together.

If you really affirmed these principles and saw the truth in them, then there would be no conflict, confrontation, or misunderstanding that you could not resolve.

Now, do you think that I'm talking about the first or the second moon? I will keep you in suspense for a while. When we continue reading in the *Surangama Sutra*, the Buddha asks Manjusri whether there is another Manjusri besides himself, or if there is a Manjusri who first "is" and then "is not." Manjusri replies that he is the only

Manjusri, and is present, but neither “is” nor “is not”. This may seem to be difficult to comprehend, but what is really behind it is what I said earlier — that we each live in our own world of six sense organs, six sense consciousnesses, and six sense objects. This is an illusory world, and it is that which leads us to think of something or someone as existing or not existing, because we judge from our own point of view. That which is real is non-dualistic. It is unchanging and neither “is” nor “is not.” The second moon is this illusory world, a reflection of the real.

You might ask, “Does the first moon, the real moon, have a real existence?” The answer is no. Let me elaborate. If you see the moon in a mirror or shining in a pond, common sense tells you that you see a reflection, a second moon, not the real moon at all. Reasoning in this way, you might be led to believe that the moon you see in the sky is the real moon. But this, too, is a second moon. Why is that? The moon we see in the sky is only a reflection itself, of sunlight bouncing off the moon’s surface. What could we do to get closer to the real moon? We could take a spaceship to the moon and then look at it. It would be quite different from our usual conception. Our romantic conception of a bright, shining orb would be replaced by an ugly, pock-mocked wasteland. Even the moon in the sky is itself an illusion, a product of our imagination.

We often believe something is real or not real according to our perspective. There is a beautiful mountain range in China which contains a famous mountain, Mt. Lu. There is a poem which states that when you are on Mt. Lu, you cannot see the beauty and grandeur that has moved poets and writers to sing its praises. You can only see Mt. Lu’s beauty from a distance. What you see when you are on the mountain is entirely different. When you look at Mt. Lu from a distance, do you see the real Mt. Lu?. No, not all. Do you see the real mountain when you are on it? Again, the answer is no. The mountain you see will be different from the one I see. Again, this analogy shows that you may think that you grasp the first moon, but all you really hold is the second moon.

As you can see, Buddhism recognizes different levels of reality. Much of what we have spoken about — common sense and the varieties of perception — belongs to the realm of philosophy. There is yet another reality: a spiritual reality that is the fruit of mystical or religious experience. Many religions may call this the experience of God, although the interpretation and understanding of the concept of God may vary greatly from religion to religion.

Someone asked me how it could be that there are so many different religions in the world, and that they all, including Buddhism, claim to be the one, true religion. I said, “Every one of them is the real, true religion.” “If that’s so,” she said, “then all these religions should be combined together to form one, great religion.” I replied,

“It’s precisely because the adherents of each religion consider theirs to be the one and only true religion that all religions cannot be combined together. There is no one willing to admit that his approach is not the best or that there may be some fallacy to his approach.” No, it would be impossible to combine all religions.

Buddhism, however, does distinguish two kinds of reality. One is called transcendental reality — literally translated as, “that which is out of this world.” The second reality comprises both that which is of this world and that which transcends this world.

The “out of this world” school maintains that everything we see is in constant flux. Everything is an illusion, a second moon. But this school maintains further that it is possible to transcend this illusory world into an eternal, unchanging world that is ultimate reality.

But according to Ch’an Buddhism, this view that there is an ultimate reality beyond what we see is itself an illusion. Ordinary sentient beings foolishly hold on to things that are constantly changing and disappearing. This is their reality. Others, who are equally foolish, hold on to the outer, eternal world. They are still the prisoners of a system, a structure of beliefs. Ordinary sentient beings hold on to existence, and these others hold on to non-existence. Those who hold these views are like the crooked-leg worms I spoke of — always grasping on to one thing, and then letting go of another. Never reaching the primary, first moon — always gazing at the second moon.

It is the Ch’an view — of the reality of both this world and the unchanging world — that leads us not to be attached to the world, but not to run away from it, either. We simply try to live a very solid life without frantically seeking things outside ourselves. Take when it’s time to take. Let go when it’s time to let go. Do not try to hold on to anything. Do not try to rid yourself of what has come to you. It is not good to have attachments, but it is equally bad to believe that you can rid yourself of this world and move to some other, eternal reality.

If money comes to you, let it come. If it starts to disappear, do not be concerned. This is an attitude of non-attachment. The reason for this is that when the money comes, you really haven’t received anything. Nothing has been added to you. When the money goes, you haven’t really lost anything. Nothing has been taken away from you.

This is not to say that maintaining such an attitude is easy. If your wife goes off with another man, or your husband with another woman, do you think you would just say, “Fine, let them go”? If your children who you’ve taken so much labor and so

many years to raise should leave, or if a long-time friend should stop talking to you, would you simply accept it and let him go? Most likely you would be very unhappy.

Only once in my life have I seen someone who had a totally non-possessive attitude. I've told this before, but I will mention it once again. This is a Chinese man who lives in Taiwan. His wife ran away with an American, and they went to live together in Hong Kong. His friends were very angry and upset for him, but he said, "I'm quite happy. This shows what good taste I had." After some time his wife returned, and he held a banquet for her. He was happy again. "The fact that she returned shows what a good husband I really am." This doesn't necessarily mean that the man is frivolous or not serious. It's just that he has a different perspective.

I hope my talk on the second moon has been helpful. You can look at yourselves and see if it is the first or the second moon that you are holding on to. Actually, no matter what I spoke about today, I really spoke about the second moon, because the first moon is not subject to concepts — there is nothing that can be said about it. And in reality it is in the first moon that we all live.



Our Sunday schedule has been changed:

10:00 a.m. to 11:30 a.m.	meditation guided by Shih-fu
11:30 to 12:30	chanting and lunch offering
12:30 to 1:30	vegetarian lunch
1:30 p.m. to 3:00	lecture by Shih-fu
3:00 to 4:20	meditation
4:30 to 5:00	evening service.

The schedule has been in effect for three weeks. The response has been overwhelmingly positive. We have had very large turnouts the last three Sundays. We think the new schedule is a welcome change and it will encourage more people to come for meditation.

October

- 16 Shih-fu and Guo Din Shih came back from Taiwan
- 23 Over 100 people join in our Sunday program
- 29 22 people participated in our Beginner's Meditation Class

November

- 4-5 18 people participate in our one-day sitting
- 10-12 Shih-fu will be giving lectures at Harvard University
- 12 One-day recitation of Buddha's name in the center
- 12-15 Shih-fu will be conducting a three-day retreat at Morgan Bay, Maine
- 16 Shih-fu will be giving a lecture at the University of Maine
- 19 Beginner's Meditation Class
- 24-1 Seven-day retreat

December

- 3, 10, 17, 24 Intermediate Meditation Classes
- 25-1 Seven-day retreat (full)

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